

[Watt hopes visit will help clarify local business needs](#)

By Karissa Minn

kminn@salisburypost.com

EAST SPENCER - U.S. Rep. Mel Watt donned a green hard hat and yellow safety vest Tuesday to find out more about [business](#) in his district.

Watt visited Rowan County as part of his annual “Trading Places” tour of North Carolina’s 12th Congressional District.

During his first stop in the county Tuesday, Watt toured Boral Composites in East Spencer, which makes composite trim boards. In the future, the plant could expand to also produce siding.

Plant Manager Deon van den Berg said the product is made of more than 75 percent recycled and rapidly renewable materials. It includes a mix of polymers and fly ash, a byproduct of burning coal.

“We understand we’re operating in a community here,” van den Berg said. “We’re convinced we’re not doing anything negative to the environment.”

The Boral Composites facility was built to Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design

standards, making it the first LEED-certified manufacturing plant in Rowan County. The building minimizes energy use and conserves other resources.

On Tuesday, Watt took a look at how the boards are molded, sanded and hardened on an assembly line. A large rubber belt imprints the boards with wood grain on one side and leaves a smooth surface on the other.

The result is a material that's crack-resistant, termite-resistant and harder than the bricks used in most modern homes.

Watt said he was "very impressed" by what he saw, and he's glad he was able to make the trip.

"If not for Trading Places, I wouldn't know about it," Watt said. "I wouldn't have been able to discuss legislative issues with them... and what potential I have to be of more assistance to them and help them succeed."

Company representatives brought up proposed laws that could affect their company, including one that would categorize fly ash as hazardous waste.

"Coal ash is one of the main ingredients of our product," said Terry Peterson, president of sister company Boral Material Technologies. "Our hope is to show the green impact of being able to reuse this resource."

Watt said he understood their concerns.

"That would mean around 80 percent of their new product is hazardous material, and nobody's going to want to buy it," he said.

Watt said most of the discussion about this law has been about protecting people and the environment from hazards, not about companies like Boral who could find safe uses for them.

“Pick up the phone and call me,” he said. “All politics is local. We’re up there voting on the philosophy of these things, but everybody wants to be sensitive... to how it affects people who are contributing to the [employment](#) base.”

This is a main reason why Watt continues to do the Training Places tour, he said. Watt said talking to people who [work](#) at local businesses is the best way to learn about how actions in Washington, D.C., are affecting the 12th district.

Later Tuesday, he was scheduled to do some framing work at Fine Frame Gallery in Salisbury.

“I’m sure there’s something I can connect there to the work I do in Washington,” Watt said. “I don’t know what it’s going to be, but I didn’t know when I came here, either.”

Watt told Boral representatives that he also wants to hear any concerns they have about the patent process it’s currently going through. He serves on the intellectual property subcommittee of the House judiciary committee.

At one point, Watt asked when the plant might expand into the siding business and employ more people.

“We’ve been working with the Town of East Spencer to find ways to support their tax base and lower unemployment,” he said.

Peterson said they’re still looking at the possibilities, but the East Spencer plant is a good candidate for expansion.

“Quite the group came together to support this project,” he said.

In the summer of 2010, both the state and the county pitched in with incentive offers for the construction of Boral Composites